

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO: NEW TEXAS GREEN SCHOOLYARDS PROJECTS



Photo copyright: City of Austin Office of Sustainability, Austin, 2017.

Use this worksheet to brainstorm ideas for a new green schoolyard project.

Size, Funding, and Services: What will the space look like, and how will it begin?

Thinking through baseline design parameters early can provide an important template to reference later. What **size** and **where** will the greenspace site be? What types of **amenities** will be placed on the site? How will the site be ADA compliant, and **accommodate** different types of learners?

What are the preliminary **budgetary requirements**? How will the ongoing budget be sustained in the future?

Where will **funding** come from to get the project off the ground? Can other organizations (e.g. PTAs) chip in time and resources?

- ★ TCiNN's [grant resource page](#) can help identify funding sources.
- ★ The [Sustainable Food Center](#) lists [funding opportunities](#) for community and school gardens at multiple impact levels in Austin.

Maintenance: Who will maintain the site, and how?

Green amenities and native plants require maintenance just like traditional lawns, especially in their first two years after being established. Keeping plants alive in the **first two years** after planting is crucial to their survival. After plants stabilize, they may require less overall maintenance and mowing than standard grass. However, groundskeepers must be **trained** in the care and keeping of the new environment. In the initial 2 years, what **level and type of maintenance** will the site require? How much **watering** might need to occur and how? What about after the initial 2 years?

- ★ *Keep **site engagement** high by asking groundskeepers to document and share the site's progress with the community. Team collaboration can be crucial for long-term site sustainability.*
- ★ *If a green schoolyard establishes a joint-use agreement with its municipality, **city resources** may be able to be utilized for **maintenance services**.*

What is the site **maintenance budget** and who is primarily responsible for maintaining it? What **materials and tools** are needed now and in the future?

- ★ *When applying for funding, include maintenance and tool costs. Multiple schools might share tools.*

What type of communicative **signage** will the project require? Signage should include **multiple languages**.

Teacher Training and Curriculum Administration: How will site users be supported?

Training and curricula must be **multi-generational** and ubiquitous so that knowledge about the greenspace and its utilization is not siloed in one person. Educators will need trainings that are **specialized** for teaching and managing classrooms outdoors, as well as curriculum specific to their school's unique environment. **Who** will administer educator trainings? **When** will teacher training occur? **How** will the green schoolyard lessons fit into TEAKS?

- ★ *[Green Schoolyards America's YouTube channel](#) contains videos about outdoor curriculum, resource inspiration, and other helpful videos.*
- ★ *[Greenprint Partners](#) has outdoor curricula for all ages and tips on leading classes outdoors.*
- ★ *[OutTeach](#) has outdoor education curricula and training resources for teachers.*
- ★ *[Austin ISD's Discovery Hill Outdoor Learning Center Youtube channel](#) provides educational videos with virtual science lessons.*
- ★ *The [Natural Learning Initiative](#) (NC State) has a [Best Practice Implementation Toolkit](#) for Preschool Outdoor Play and Learning Environments.*

How comfortable are educators in outdoor spaces? How might their comfortability be addressed?

Wildlife and Soil Health: How will the site be kept healthy?

All plants depend on **living soil** that is healthy **in and around** the project area.
How will the site assess its surrounding area's soil health?

- ★ *Start with assessing **soil health**, then pick plants based on **habitat/biome**, and choose **physical structures last**. For more information on soil health and testing, visit [Texas A&M Agrilife](#).*
- ★ *Use plants that already exist in the project area to **anchor** new plants.*
- ★ *Students can **love new plants to death**! Protect soft plants and new trees' root systems and bark with gentle barriers until flora is old enough to withstand interaction.*

Storytelling and Placemaking: What story will the green schoolyard tell?

Native plants can teach **environmental history and anthropology**, engage with Texas history, and encourage cultural connectedness through indigenous origin stories.

How can the green schoolyard project tell students about the people and animals who lived there before them? How is local, contemporary **Texas culture** shaped by **local ecology**? What part of Texas' history can be told through the natural environment?

What unique plant species or animal might be native to school campus land?

- ★ *Green schoolyards can also provide accessibility to nature for youth who otherwise lack greenspaces in their neighborhoods, enabling **community-wide access to the outdoors**.*
- ★ *For edible education programming, visit the PEAS (Partners for Education, Agriculture, and Sustainability) [website](#).*

Building a Plant Palette: How can strategic decision making strengthen the site?

Brainstorm the plants and nature features that might be at the site. If possible, anticipate rising temperatures and design for longevity by planting species suitable for slightly hotter climates that are about 20 miles south of the project area.

- ★ *As green schoolyards gain in popularity, so do native plants. Communicate with nurseries early, and with other local green schoolyard projects when possible, to share resources, cut costs, and avoid competitive pricing.*
- ★ *Find out what plant species are reasonable for a project and its scope before soliciting feedback from students and community members to avoid unfulfilled promises.*

The Green Schoolyard is Brown! The value of the “off” season.

What can fall and winter seasons **teach** students about the ecoregions they live in? What **biological phenomena** is still happening during the “off” seasons?

How can students **interact** with the space when it’s brown in ways that they can’t when it’s green?

- ★ *Opportunities to care for the environment can provide students with career readiness, and spur academic interest in fields like biology and landscape architecture.*
- ★ *Need curriculum ideas? Visit TCiNN’s outdoor curricula [webinars page](#) for help.*

Sustainability and Health Benefits

See TCiNN’S other resource on green schoolyards for more information on these subject:

- Habitat and Biodiversity Preservation
- Stormwater Drainage
- Heat Island Remediation
- Air Quality Improvements and Carbon Sequestration
- Physical Health Benefits
- Mental Health Benefits

Other Resources

- Visit [Texas Children in Nature Network’s resource page](#) to find out more information, funding sources, and get ideas for starting a new green schoolyard project.
- Visit [SPARK: School Park Program](#) to pursue a playground-to-community park pathway.
- [Amy Bryan](#) with [OLE! \(Outdoor Learning Environments\) Austin](#) is open to contact for help with maintenance questions, cost expectations, and setting expectations for volunteers and parents.
- The OLE! coalition can provide site demonstration, professional training, landscape best practices, and consulting with [Natural Learning Initiative](#)-trained designers.
- The [Lower Colorado River Authority](#) supports local communities in its service area with grants through its [Community Development Partnership Program](#).

This resource sheet was generously informed by conversations with [Jaime Gonzales](#), and an informational session led by [Adam Bienenstock](#), founder of Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds. The author is grateful for Jaime and Adam’s knowledge, time, and dedication to getting youth into nature

Jaime Gonzales (environmental educator, conservationist, climate adaptation specialist) in discussion with the authors, July 2024.

Adam Bienenstock, “Informational Session with Adam Bienenstock” (Zoom, Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds, August 2 2024).

Author: Janice Hagerman, University of Texas at Austin, August 2024.